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SUBJECT: JURY STILL OUT ON IMPLICATIONS OF SLA-ABDEL WAHID OUSTER

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Several Fur activists in South Darfur, including an SLA commander, justify Abdel Wahid's ouster as Chairman on the basis of his lack of leadership and increasing distance from Darfurian popular opinion. The SLA faction now led by Ahmed Abdul Shafi is organizing itself in Asmara and intends to return imminently to Darfur and hold a general conference. Some Fur leaders conveyed cautious support for Shafi, but highlight that it is still too early to determine a majority Fur view on the SLA split. UNMIS Civil Affairs in South Darfur contend that with Abdel Wahid in a weakened position, the moment is ripe for the international community to extend him an olive branch to sign the DPA. The further division of the SLA may add to the complexity of the security, political, and humanitarian situation on the ground in Darfur. End summary.

FED UP WITH ABDEL WAHID?

¶2. (SBU) Active Response Corp (ARC) Officer and Embassy Poloff met August 8 with LTC Ahmed Fadul in Nyala, South Darfur, to discuss the recent ouster of Abdel Wahid as Chairman of his faction of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA). Fadul, now aligned with Shafi, previously supported Abdel Wahid, and has worked with the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) since July 2004. He remarked that the split with Abdel Wahid had been contemplated for at least a year, but because of timing and internal politics, the decision was delayed.

¶3. (SBU) Fadul articulated several key reasons for Abdel Wahid's dismissal. First, Abdel Wahid failed to lead the movement effectively, demonstrating little administrative or organizational capacity, which constrained his ability to negotiate with the Government of Sudan and international actors. Second, the former SLA leader only provided limited support to his fighters, neglecting their logistical requirements and trying to command from abroad rather than from Darfur. As a result, many within the movement perceived Abdel Wahid to be unconnected to his base, particularly to his commanders in the field. Third, Fadul held that Abdel Wahid's increasingly "selfish" actions isolated him from the movement. The former Chairman's unwillingness to consult field commanders and establish meaningful subsidiary positions within the faction provided additional impetus for his removal. (Note: septel provides translation of an August 1 letter from Shafi's group with a fuller explanation for the ouster. End note.)

EARLY VIEWS OF SHAFI AND NEXT STEPS

¶4. (SBU) Responding to ARC officer's queries on the views and anticipated next steps of the new faction, Fadul explained that Shafi's appointment is only temporary, pending an "SLA general conference" where members will be selected for key positions. Shafi is currently in Asmara, organizing his supporters and refining their

agenda. Shafi's intent is to return to Darfur within the "next week or so," though logistical issues pose problems. Fadul expects the general conference to occur soon after Shafi's return, possibly in the vicinity of Jebel Mara.

15. (SBU) Fadul repeatedly stated that peace is a strategic goal of the new faction. Explaining why Shafi's group, then, had not signed the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), he noted their dissatisfaction with the provisions on compensation and Janjaweed disarmament, as well as the inadequate allocation of executive authorities for the position of Senior Assistant to the President. Ninety percent of the agreement is acceptable, he remarked, but full support would not be possible until these outstanding issues are addressed. The commander offered that the Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation (DDDC) could serve as a useful tool for generating popular buy-in to the DPA, but that international community involvement would be necessary for the process to produce a meaningful outcome. Fadul reiterated that SLA-Shafi remains committed to upholding its obligations under the 2004 Ndjamena Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement (HCFA), and that the new group wants to bridge the gap on unresolved provisions with the international community. (Comment: Based on Fadul's discourse and conversations ARC officer had with other SLA-Shafi commanders, it appears that many previous Abdel Wahid supporters felt that the former Chairman had lost too much credibility within the Fur population and the international community to remain an effective negotiator. For this reason, among others, a re-branding of the SLA was needed. End comment.)

16. (SBU) Fadul contended that Shafi's faction had no intention of joining the National Redemption Front (NRF). He explained that the group's focus was on Darfur, and did not extend to the national agenda espoused by members of the NRF (i.e., those affiliated with JEM). Fadul added that the Abdel Wahid's ouster was well known throughout the Fur community, though many had not yet formed

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opinions on the development. He held that there were no "hard feelings" toward Abdel Wahid, who would remain part of the movement and could even regain the Chairmanship should the commanders so decide at the general conference. (Comment: A general conference convened by Shafi, filled with his supporters, and following an agenda established by the new Chairman, would not likely lead to a favorable outcome for Abdel Wahid. End comment.)

17. (SBU) Fadul, who speaks fluent English, was optimistic that differences between his new SLA-Shafi faction and the international community could be bridged. Like most other Darfurians, he strongly supports the rapid deployment to the region of UN peacekeepers, who he believes would create the necessary security conditions to facilitate returns of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Fadul appeared realistic regarding the unlikely prospect of re-opening the DPA, but held firm that Shafi's group would not sign unless their concerns with the accord were addressed.

SELECT FUR LEADERS ON ABDEL WAHID OUSTER

18. (SBU) ARC Officer and Poloff spoke with other prominent Fur political activists in Nyala, including Dr. Mohamed Ahmed Abdulla Abaker, Mahdi Bosh, and Dr. Mohamed Eisa Alaj, all of whom had previously met with the CDA in late June. (Biographical Note: Dr. Mohamed Ahmed is a physician currently working at the teaching hospital in Nyala. He is Chairman of the Fur Committee in Nyala and a key player in its efforts to organize politically. He has strong ties to both Abdel Wahid and Shafi. Originally from the Jebel Mara, he has one brother working as a lawyer in Saudi Arabia. Mahdi Bosh is the Executive Officer of the GNU-sponsored Commission for the Eradication of Abduction of Women and Children and a former prosecutor general in Darfur. Dr. Mohamed Eisa Alaj is a pharmacist -- who owns at least one pharmacy in Nyala -- with strong ties to Abdel Wahid. He has one brother in New Jersey. All three individuals speak English. End note.)

19. (SBU) The prevailing sentiment of the Fur leaders was one of frustration with Abdel Wahid's leadership and his inability to

advance Fur interests more effectively. They noted the glaring absence of a "political plan" for the SLA and expressed confidence that Shafi would be able to provide greater direction and organization for the movement. The activists highlighted oft-cited "shortcomings" in the DPA, to include the insufficiency of international oversight and lack of credible mechanisms to ensure GNU compliance. Dr. Mohamed Ahmed, in particular, provided a cogent six-point discourse on means to improve the DPA. He argued that:

-- An acceptable UN official should be appointed to impartially mediate between Darfurians and the GNU.

-- The GNU must quickly make public its disarmament plan of the Janjaweed, whose dismantlement must be overseen and verified by the international community and the rebel movements. (Note: ARC officer informed Dr. Mohamed Ahmed that a plan had been delivered to AMIS, which was reviewing it. Additionally, the DPA provides for rebel involvement in the verification of Janjaweed disarmament. End note.)

-- Adequate compensation must be paid expeditiously to Darfurians. (Note: ARC Officer stressed that the initial GNU \$30 million contribution was only a down payment and would very likely be increased as payments were disbursed. End note.)

-- Darfurians deserve greater political representation at both the state and national levels. Ahmed held that only thirty percent of the legislative and executive positions in Darfur should be filled by non-Darfurians, rather than visa-versa.

-- The DDDC, to be viewed as a legitimate process, must be organized under the auspices of the UN. Ahmed proposed that the first stage of the DDDC should be a discussion among "educated" Darfurians inside and outside of Sudan to better define the nature of the relationship between Darfur's states and the central government. Later stages of the dialogue could then address issues of regional reconsolidation, intertribal reconciliation, and resolution of land disputes.

-- The Senior Assistant to the President position currently filled by Minni Minawi provided insufficient executive authorities. Ahmed argued that the Special Advisor has no power to directly influence - politically or fiscally - the Walis of Darfur and, furthermore, is excluded from key decision-making processes on security and military matters.

¶10. (SBU) Dr. Mohamed Ahmed remarked that he is leading an effort to create a Fur "working group" in South Darfur to promote political

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and humanitarian objectives. The group consists of four committees and thirteen sub-groups, but he did not provide detail on the mission or tasks of the various components. The doctor noted that more than 23 tribes are represented in the working group, which includes IDP, student, and women constituencies. (Comment: When pressed to provide greater detail about the working group or its plan to become more public, Ahmed was evasive. This may be due to its inchoate form or sensitivities about organizing such a group given the intolerant political environment created by the GNU. End comment.)

UNMIS VIEW ON SLA RIFT

¶11. (SBU) In a separate conversation, Ali Hassan, Head of UNMIS Civil Affairs in South Darfur, echoed Fadul's assertion that the Fur, including those in the IDP camps, were well aware of the recent SLA rift. Based on his interaction with Fur IDP representatives, there was no clear majority opinion in terms of which rebel leader to favor. He outlined the UN position that in order for the DPA to truly work, those outside the accord would have to be brought on board. Notwithstanding Abdel Wahid's removal, the former Chairman continues to hold sway and serve as a symbol for many Fur, which suggests that efforts by the GNU, Minawi, and international community must continue to gain Abdel Wahid's support for the DPA.

¶12. (SBU) Hassan opined that recent developments have had a mixed effect on Abdel Wahid's position. On the one hand, he has been strengthened by the obvious lack of DPA implementation and the on-going violence in Darfur. On the other hand, Abdel Wahid has been obviously weakened by his ouster as Chairman, the creation of new rebel factions, and the ascendancy of Minawi to Senior Assistant to the President. The change of circumstances for Abdel Wahid suggests that the international community may now have more leverage to pressure him into signing the DPA. Hassan posited that the UN and other key stakeholders should make a public pronouncement denouncing Shafi's faction, as it only complicates the situation on the ground and undermines Fur solidarity (and, in return, could prompt Abdel Wahid to give support to the DPA). ARC officer responded that it may be more prudent to determine where Shafi stood on the DPA before making definitive statements, especially given Abdel Wahid's recent silence and diminished stature.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) While the Fur leaders and UNMIS officials with whom ARC Officer and Poloff spoke generally believed that Abdel Wahid's marginalization was a positive development for the SLA, there remained some ambiguity on the extent of field commander support for Shafi. Fadul remarked that the July 27 letter revealing the SLA split listed a number of supporters who, in fact, had not endorsed the ouster. He added that the August 1 declaration was the definitive list of SLA military and political officials who endorse Shafi's chairmanship. Still, UNMIS Ali Hassan and UNDSS in North Darfur, who have been in touch with various Abdel Wahid military leaders, intimate that some influential commanders remain loyal to Abdel Wahid. With his leadership challenged and significant support lined up behind Shafi, Abdel Wahid appears weakened, which may present an opportunity for the international community to be in a stronger position to encourage his support for the DPA. The further division of the SLA may very well add to the complexity of the security, political and humanitarian situation on the ground in Darfur. End comment.

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